



U.S. Immigration
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39 COMPANIES AND RESIDENTS WITH FINANCIAL TIES TO NOTORIOUS DRUG CARTEL NAMED UNDER “KINGPIN ACT”

SAN DIEGO — Special agents with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and the Department of Treasury converged on a multi-million dollar home in a gated Chula Vista neighborhood yesterday to serve notice that the owners’ assets were being frozen under the provisions of the Kingpin Act.

The action comes in the wake of a joint ICE-Treasury investigation linking nine Mexican currency exchange houses to money laundering activities on behalf of the Arellano Felix Organization, a violent drug trafficking ring operating out of Mexico. The investigation also identified six other area businesses with ties to the ring.

As a result of that investigation, the Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Assets Control has added the names of 15 area companies and 24 individuals to the roster of businesses and people listed under the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act, commonly known as the Kingpin Act. The move makes it illegal for residents of the United States to engage in commercial transactions with the designees. It also freezes any assets the designated companies or individuals have in the United States.

ICE agents say the money laundering scheme was led by Ivonne Soto Vega, also known as “*La Pantera*”, and Jose Manuel Ruelas Martinez. The cell allegedly used currency exchange houses, or *casas de cambio*, as fronts to launder U.S. currency earned by the Arellano Felix cartel through its narcotics sales in the United States. According to agents, the drug proceeds were then bulk smuggled into Mexico. Soto Vega and Ruelas Martinez are both in the custody of Mexican authorities awaiting trial on charges stemming from their involvement with the Cartel.

In Tijuana, the cell consisted of several currency exchange houses including *Centro Cambiario Kino, S.A. de C.V.*, *GS Plus Consultores S.A. de C.V.*, and *Multiservicios Gamal S.A. de C.V.* The cell also has a presence in Guadalajara with *Grupo Gamal, S.A. de C.V.* In addition to currency exchange houses, the cell also included *Casa de Empeño Rio Tijuana, S.A. de C.V.*, a pawnshop in Tijuana, and *Hacienda de Don Jose Restaurant Bar, S.A. de C.V.*, a restaurant and bar supply company also located in Tijuana.

This week’s action is part of the ongoing effort by the Departments of Treasury, Justice, State, Defense, and Homeland Security, to carry out the Kingpin Act. Signed into law in 1999, the Kingpin Act applies economic sanctions against narcotics traffickers and their associates worldwide.

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